



Handling food improperly could impact wing mission

By Capt. Megan McCormick
Public health

Editor's note: With Air Fete, Fourth of July, a bazaar and warm weather rapidly approaching, the public health staff has received many queries about approval for temporary food facilities. This article provides information on how the approval process works. Requests for temporary food sales must also be approved by the 48th Service Squadron.

All temporary food facilities that prepare food items for sale to the public must be approved by the 48th Medical Group military public health office.

The goal of this approval process is to ensure people follow safe food practices and maintain the health and safety of the base population. Public health works with groups to find reasonable alternatives if their initial plans are not approved.

People need to understand, however, that bending the rules can have direct mission-crippling impact.

The following standards must be applied to all food sales to the public.

❑ Foods must be procured from approved sources such as the commissary.

❑ Requests to sell raw poultry and pork, meat items, especially ground products, and items that require many ingredients or many chopped items are heavily scrutinized due

to the large amount of handling they require. Public health is particularly hesitant to allow operations to handle raw poultry because it must be considered already contaminated with Salmonella bacteria from processing, and preparers must take special precautions. Some organizations successfully use pre-cooked chicken products available at the commissary. Hotdogs are precooked, require little handling and are another good choice, as well as hamburgers, which are often pre-prepared in patties, and sausages. These items require little handling, and though the public health staff must ensure they're thoroughly cooked, they will be usually approved.

❑ Foods may not be prepared in the home. When cooking, four hours is the absolute maximum time when it is safe to let food be in the "danger zone" for bacterial growth (between 40 degrees and 140 degrees). Home refrigerators do not have the cooling or space capacity to rapidly bring hot items down to safe temperatures, especially when dealing with the larger volumes usually involved in items for sale. It's safest to keep raw items cold, then heat or cook them at the site just before serving. Another reason for this policy is the staff can inspect temporary food facilities and educate people if things aren't being done properly but they can't monitor operations in people's homes.

Many people don't follow every food-handling rule when they're cooking at home.

Taking a risk at home is a personal choice. But when serving a large number of people, the risk is magnified. The bottom line is improperly handled food can threaten the entire wing's mission-ready capability. The Liberty Wing can't afford to take that risk.

Squadron functions that do not offer food for sale to the public do not fall under public health jurisdiction. They do, however, pose a potential foodborne illness outbreak risk — especially during the summer months when it is more difficult to maintain foods at safe temperatures. If unit commanders or supervisors have concerns, the public health staff is available to educate people and make recommendations. The staff also provides foodhandler training for groups such as the officers' wives club or enlisted spouses club, which tend to participate in many of these events.

For more information on safe foodhandling practices, call the public health staff at Ext. 2235.

Bake sales are also approved through public health but are not as closely regulated because they normally offer safe items for sale. The staff rarely restricts these operations, but requires that food be protected from contamination with individual wrapping. Baked goods should not contain fillings such as cream or custard.

Tuzla

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These were isolated instances in a daily routine that was largely peaceful and predictable for Lakenheath's security police. But even so, it was a learning experience for many.

"It's been an education," said Capt. John Young, who commanded Lakenheath's deployed cops at Tuzla. "For 16 years, I've done this in practice about a thousand times, but I never did it for real. It's a lot easier than I thought it was going to be."

For the captain, working with the Army turned out to be a pleasant experience. Others learned more about themselves and the people they work with.

"One thing about a deployment (is), you learn more about the people you deploy with and the relationships you build with them," Bleistein said. "When you go back, you relate to them better overall."

Still another learning experience was doing something that for now is peculiar to operations in Bosnia — armed convoys. Any time U.S. servicemembers at Tuzla leave the base, they must be a part of an armed convoy, something new for Lakenheath's cops.

"The one thing we don't do that often is convoys," Bleistein explained. "We got trained on it prior to coming down here, at the regional training center in Sembach, Germany. This is an experience that we gain a lot of experience from."

Liberty Wing cops also learned to live with aspects of life peculiar to Tuzla AB — mud, which seems to be everywhere most of the time; dust when there's no mud; living in tents, which most Air Force people there said was not such a bad thing; working six or seven days a week ("every day is Monday" is the local saying); drinking bottled water all the time; and seeing the local village just outside the perimeter but not being allowed to venture into it except in a vehicle convoy.

People fortunate enough to go off base in a convoy could see the effects of the war NATO stepped in to stop, for which many locals thank U.S. and NATO troops.

"The Bosnians actually say thank you personally," Ratkowski said. "When we're out there, the Bosnians say thank you for stopping this war."



Amn. Jeremy Sparks (right) stands as part of an international color guard assembled to greet Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen at Tuzla AB.

Lakenheath's most recent experience in Bosnia was peaceful, as it has been there for more than a year. But that doesn't dampen people's pride at having served in this historic peacemaking endeavor.

"I'm glad I'm here," Pierpoint said. "This is history in the making, hopefully, and I'm proud to be a part of it."